





# actuality without context

*Leasing our eyes and ears and nerves to commercial interests is like handing over the common speech to a private corporation, or like giving the earth's atmosphere to a company as a monopoly.*

Marshall McLuhan

We all develop an interdependent relationship with the mass media — feeding on each others weaknesses. Giving the public what it wants means giving the public what it is used to. The public holds, for example, certain popular expectations of newspapers — assumptions about what they should look like, what they should say and what they should cover.

Unfortunately, this relationship has not been adequately delineated for mass media research has shared these failings:

- \* Sophisticated research techniques have been handicapped by primitive theories.
- \* Descriptive research has prevailed over analytical research.
- \* Research has tended to consist of a superficial before and after analysis.
- \* The media have been studied in isolation from the political, economic and social context.

We can say, however, that mass media communication involves the interaction of four variables: source, message, channel and audience. This communication process is complex, and queries about the influence of the mass media necessitate

these sorts of questions:

What is "news"? How does the mass media define news? What factors condition the values, attitudes and expectations of journalists? What is the consequence of this conditioning? What factors determine whether an event will become news? How does the communication system affect the news gathering process?

I suggest the following hypothesis — that the mass media have a threefold responsibility to:

- \* Provide a meaningful analysis of events and issues.
- \* Explain and analyse conflicting ideas and beliefs.
- \* Present, clarify and assess the goals, values and institutions of society.

We then need to ask three questions about any news report?

- \* Does it enable people to make informed and intelligent decisions?
- \* Does it help people to understand the events being reported?
- \* Does it clarify or mystify the issues arising from these events?

The answers depend, of course, on a whole series of inter-related assumptions about the comprehensiveness, context, relevance, balance and significance of each news report. The difficulties presented by such assumptions are seen in these comments by the Chairman of the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, Professor J.J. Auchmuty:

*By its willingness to give disproportionate publicity to*

*unimportant activities of small minorities, the press must be held partly responsible for the continuance of student problems which have occurred in universities in recent times.*

*The press cannot please everybody but Vice Chancellors would like to see a better balanced and more reliable reporting of university affairs.*

Professor Auchmuty is a victim of the public relations phobia described by Sir Kenneth Wheare:

*All universities want a good press. By that they mean either no mention at all in the papers or, alternatively, frequent mention and always favorable.*

The Professor would like to see less reports about student activism, restricted quotas and inadequate finance, and more reports about research activities, teaching methods and course changes. Vice Chancellors do make token concessions in attempting to explain media misbehaviour. Melbourne's Professor Derham has written:

*Why is there so little balance in the reporting of university activities? Mainly because newspapers are not primarily interested in informing readers. They are primarily interested in exciting, stimulating and entertaining their readers. A university going about its lawful occasions is not news. Unruly behaviour by students is news it seems.*



University news in the press, radio and television usually deals with items about specific individuals or events. This phenomena is what Stuart Hall has called "actuality without context" — events divorced from their relevant context.

## THE PRESS AND STUDENT DISSENT

Student dissent is, for instance, portrayed as a clear black and white issue — anarchy versus order. This treatment is, of course, symptomatic of a failure to treat minorities seriously, give minorities meaningful opportunities to express their views, and attempt a serious analysis of minority motives and views.

The mass media are not interested in discerning trends, explaining movements and dealing with philosophical concepts because these are ambiguous, imprecise and complex. The consequence is a plethora of distorted news stories based on misunderstandings and misperceptions — stories about conflict, accident, tragedy, death, crisis, confrontation and violence, which are ritualistically separated from the complex interplay of social, economic and political factors contributing to the event reported.

All mass media reports of marches, lock-ins and sit-ins share certain characteristics:

- \* **VIOLENCE.** There is an emphasis on actual or potential violence.
- \* **ELITISM.** The viewpoints that get the most space are the viewpoints of officials.
- \* **INCIDENTS.** Violent incidents are given disproportionate publicity
- \* **REASONS.** The reasons for the protest are dismissed with such phrases as anti-Springbok,



anti-Vietnam or anti-conscription.

The assumption that Professors Derham and Auchmuty share, however, is that events and issues are intrinsically positive (good for the image of the university) or negative (bad for the image of the university) e.g., student dissent is negative whereas research is positive. But there is a difference between an event and aspects of an event. I suggest, for example, that the relevant argument about student dissent is how it is reported — not whether it should be reported.

The Sun, The Age, The Australian and The Herald carried 1065½ column inches on student dissent in September last year when four draft resisters took refuge in the Union Building, University of Melbourne. Most of these column inches concerned the Commonwealth Police raid on 30 September.

The Herald "broke" the story on 30/9/71 with an essentially descriptive

summary headlined:

**100 RAID UNI., BUT MISS DRAFT 4.**

But, having reported different sides of a controversy does not relieve newspapers from a responsibility to judge the "truth" of the arguments. The Herald journalist, who was present during the raid, wrote a "balanced" story which portrayed a clear-cut event as confused and contradictory. The failure to link the events to the larger realities of conscription, political repression and dissent confirmed an already established media image that draft resistance and student dissent are without purpose or reason. The Herald reported the raid in terms of this pre-existing image. Incidents were selected and interpreted for their consistency with this image. The story was also typical of reflex journalism — opinion offered as fact, undocumented assertions open to question, unsupported opinion, unsupportable



opinion, neglect of relevant details, inexact terminology and accuracy sacrificed for rhetorical effectiveness.

The Herald's first edition front-page story carried three pictures:

- \* A 12 column inch photo of a Commonwealth Police Inspector who "sits in pain after a falling chair hit his head".
- \* A 72 column inch photo of police smashing doors.
- \* A 13 column inch photo of Deputy Commissioner Davies.

But, the second and subsequent editions carried only one front page photograph — an enlarged photo (29½ col. in.) of the "injured" police inspector.

We can now return to Stuart Hall's "actuality without context". The Herald story ignored or underplayed



these aspects:

- \* The fact that the students offered no resistance.
- \* The fact that the police did not produce a warrant.
- \* The fact that the only "violence" was police violence.
- \* The fact that the police had a pre-prepared statement on the student violence that "occurred" during the raid.
- \* The reasons for draft resistance.

- \* The reasons why the draft resisters took in the Union Building.

The consequence of all this was a mischievous story that divorced an event from the context which would have made the event understandable. But, mischievousness is the inevitable consequence of a mass media which:

- \* encourages conformity for its own sake;
- \* promotes the status quo;
- \* entertains and distracts, rather than informs and stimulates;
- \* lacks meaningful controversy;
- \* excludes minorities from effective participation in the community; and,
- \* deceives the majority of people into accepting secondhand impressions as reality.

DAVID GRIFFITHS

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